Health and Social Benefits of Volunteering

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Overview of Volunteerism

Volunteering is any activity in which time is given freely to benefit another person, group or cause

- Rate of volunteerism has been stable or rising slightly over the last 25 years
- In 1998, **56%** of the US population volunteered in the prior 12 months (Wilson, 2000)
In your own experience, what benefits have you derived from being a volunteer?
Health Benefits Documented in Research (Wilson, 2000)

- Improved life satisfaction
- Improved self-esteem and self-efficacy
- Improved self-rated health status
- Improved educational/occupational achievement
- Solidarity and social interaction
- Dealing with own fears and apprehensions around a health issue (e.g. AIDS, cancer)
Mentor Program Volunteers (2007)

Mentors reported the following “to a great extent”

- Look forward to seeing my mentee (84%)
- Contribute to the community (75%)
- Positive impact on youth (53%)
Community Coalition Volunteers (2000)

Coalition members reported each of the following as a “major” or “moderate” benefit:

- Making the community healthier (88%)
- Getting more info about community services (76%)
- Fulfill responsibility to the community (73%)
- Sense of satisfaction in being involved in an important project (70%)
- Social support from other with similar values (68%)
Benefits to Older Adults (Thoits & Hewitt, 2001)

Compared to non-volunteers:
- Higher life satisfaction
- Stronger will to live
- Greater feelings of self-respect
- Fewer symptoms of anxiety and depression
- Lower mortality rate (63% lower in one study) controlling for health factors that affect mortality
Effects of Volunteering on Youth (Wilson & Musick, 2000)

- Reduced problem behavior among volunteering youth (e.g. truancy, drug abuse) - did not find same reductions in problem behavior with social club involvement or team sports
- Early volunteering increases probability of becoming politically active as adults
- Family ethic of social responsibility has a positive effect on civic commitment
Cautions and Limitations

- More is not always better – too many hours can lead to role strain and reduced subjective well being
- Type of work can make a difference (restorative vs. stressful)
- Most research has been cross-sectional (association rather than causation)
- Most measures of health and well being are single items rather than scales (though depression has been measured with a validated scale)
If you have had a positive volunteer experience, what were the reasons it was so positive?

If you have had a negative volunteer experience, what were the reasons it was so negative?
Best Practices in Volunteer Management (Hager & Brudney, 2004)

- Regular supervision and communication with volunteers
- Liability coverage or insurance protection for volunteers (if dealing with people)
- Regular collection of volunteer hours and # of volunteers
- Screening and matching volunteers to the assignment
- Face to face invitations (Wilson, 2000)
Best Practices in Volunteer Management (Hager & Brudney, 2004)

- Written policies and job descriptions
- Recognition activities
- Annual measurement of volunteer impact
- Training and professional development for the volunteers
- Training for paid staff in working with volunteers
References


Musick, MA & Wilson, J (2003). Volunteering and depression: The role of psychological and social resources in different age groups. Social Science & Medicine, 56, pp 259-269.

